



‘Underlearning’ the Lessons of Iraq: American Agility and Russian Influence

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Perhaps one of the most cited criticisms of US foreign policy relating to Syria today is the notion that President Barack Obama has “overlearned” the lessons of Iraq. The President, so scarred from the quagmire that was the Iraq war, is believed to have become too reluctant to pull the trigger elsewhere, especially in places where his critics deem the application of US military force necessary.

It is not clear how one can possibly “overlearn” the lessons of the most significant American foreign policy error in recent history. This idea seems even more preposterous considering that we are still teaching the lessons of the Peloponnesian War in all American military academies some 2500 years after it ended. But can we say that the Iraq war has ended to even be fully learned, let alone overlearned? At the time of writing, an American-supported offensive by Iraqi government forces is targeting Mosul to take the Iraqi city back from ISIS, a group that formed from remnants of Al-Qaeda and former Ba’athists, battle-hardened during the American occupation of Iraq and paradoxically brought together as part of the insurgency against it.

The most important part of learning the lessons of the Iraq war, or any war for that matter, is understanding the magnitude of the costs and why some had trouble foreseeing them. Today, we are still counting the costs of the Iraq war. One cost, which is particularly pertinent today yet routinely overlooked, is the impact of the Iraq war on current American agility.

The United States today exercises greater influence around the world than any other nation, however that does not mean that its power is limitless. Every such state throughout history has learned the fatal cost of overextension, and that guarding against it is critical for the self-preservation of power. The Soviet Union learned this lesson in Afghanistan over the course of a decade that culminated in its dissolution. This month marked the 15th anniversary of the US war in Afghanistan, while the ongoing war in Iraq is entering yet another stage, and these only represent two of the places where the United States has deployed military force during this time.

As critics of Obama’s reticence to exercise more military force today, some of whom were Iraq war proponents, raise alarm at the rise of Russian influence around the world, they often fail to note, perhaps not unintentionally, that Russia is emboldened to throw its weight around the world precisely because it reads American vulnerability. Indeed, those who cry loudest about the evils of the autocrat Putin, seem to be most envious of his ability to formulate Russian foreign policy while largely disregarding domestic constraints. Fortunately for Americans, our leaders have term limits and routinely face the prospect of losing at the ballot box.

Unfortunately for American foreign policy, this means it cannot be formulated by political leaders without taking public opinion into account. The recent period of post-Soviet Russian behavior, characterized by belligerency and expansionism, started not in Syria or Ukraine but in Georgia. This was not during the administration of allegedly gun-shy Obama, but rather that of the trigger-happy Bush, at a moment when American public opinion of the Iraq war [was](#) at its lowest point. Democracies play the global game of politics with most of their cards showing. Putin can take comfort in the fact that the United States is less likely to check his global ambitions today, not because of who sits in the White House but because of an American public that is sick of unending, repetitive and fruitless wars. The single biggest reason for that today is the Iraq war.

A recent *Pew* survey from the spring of this year [found](#) that a majority of Americans, 57%, believe the US should “Deal with its own problems/Let other countries deal with theirs as best they can,” while only 37% believed the US should “Help other countries deal with their problems.” Similarly, 41% of Americans believe the US is already doing “too much” to solve global problems while only 27% believe the US is doing “too little.” Additionally, a recent survey of active duty military personnel [indicates](#) that members of the armed services are also fed up with US involvement abroad. Majorities of respondents said the US should be “less engaged” in foreign aid, conventional military operations, and stability operations or state building. The only activities respondents said the US should be more involved in are counter-terrorism operations and homeland defense. When asked specifically how they view US involvement in nation-building in the Middle East, 55% of respondents opposed it, doubling the number of those respondents that were in favor.

These public attitudes were also reflected in the popular support for presidential candidates like Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump. While Trump is on the path to a loss at the ballot box, such an outcome will be the product of voters rejecting Trump’s persona more than handing a mandate to Hillary Clinton based on her decidedly more internationalist positions.

The error of the Iraq war was borne out of the flawed understanding of the United States’ relative power in relation to the rest of the world. Although the US was victorious after the Cold War, its ability to accomplish any objective around the world was limited. Being alone on top created the misperception of unlimited power and influence. But even great power, super power, or hyperpower, whatever one wants to call it, is not unlimited. The Iraq war was launched at a time when the United States believed it was in a different position in the world than it was. Shortly thereafter, Washington began to awake to a very different reality, one that is far closer to multipolarity than unipolarity.

This reality is one that demands increased selectivity in decisions around the application of military force. And it is in this context that debate and discussion about the escalation of US military force in Syria continues. It is impossible to know exactly where such escalation will lead and how it will play out, but it is a step toward further and deeper involvement in yet another Middle East conflict.

There is a chance that such escalated intervention is brief and quickly accomplishes its stated objectives of putting Syria on the path toward a more stable outcome, but the first casualty of war is always the battle plan where the likelihood of this best-case scenario transpiring is minimal. It is important to ask today what a long, drawn out engagement for the US in Syria means for US public support for future foreign adventures. If you think the American public is constraining political elites with their war weariness today, imagine what that dynamic might be like five years into a Syria intervention and what that means for American agility and ability to check Russian behavior around the globe. Who knows if Iraq or Afghanistan will have stable governments capable of independently securing their hold on power and territorial integrity at that point? Who knows where else Russia, a state spanning 11 time zones, may seek to throw its weight around? If \$600 billion is spent on the military but there isn't sufficient political support for deploying it, does it really make a sound?

Just because the Russians can exploit American mistakes and limited agility today, this does not mean American ability to check Russia around the globe is non-existent. It is important to remember that even if Russia can take advantage of this opening, its power projection remains limited to its immediate periphery and long-standing client states, and even in those spaces its influence is limited in its effect. At the same time, while reduced, American power projection extends far beyond its borders and traditional clients around the world. There is no reason though to haphazardly turn a small opening into a larger one.

One of the great costs of the Iraq war, indeed one we are seeing on full display years after the formal American withdrawal, is its impact on American agility on the global stage today. Perhaps blinded by hyperpower, this was a cost Washington failed to anticipate in early 2003, but it has no excuse for failing to admit it today. It is unfortunate and ironic that many Iraq war advocates calling for further application of US military force today, in part to check ominous Russian behavior, have yet to learn this lesson.